Columbia University
AND
Barnard College Faculty
IN
Defense of the History
AND
Meaning of War

Between Hamas and Jews

October 30, 2023

An Open Letter from Columbia University and Barnard College Faculty in Defense of Robust Debate About the History and Meaning of the War in Israel/Gaza:

The most recent devastating violence in Israel and Gaza that began on October 7, 2023 has had very disturbing reverberations on our campus – for all of us, students, faculty, staff, and the larger Columbia community. We write now to express grave concerns about how some of our students are being viciously targeted with doxing, public shaming, surveillance by members of our community, including other students, and reprisals from employers. These egregious forms of harassment and efforts to chill otherwise protected speech on campus are unacceptable, and we implore every person in the Columbia University community - faculty, administrators, students, alums, public safety - to do more to protect all of our students while preserving Columbia University as a beacon for "fostering critical thinking and opening minds to different points of view," as President Shafik wrote to the community in her October 18th message about upholding our collective values.

As scholars who are committed to robust inquiry about the most challenging matters of our time, we feel compelled to respond to those who label our students anti-Semitic if they express empathy for the lives and dignity of Palestinians, and/or if they signed on to a student-written statement that situated the military action begun on October 7th within the larger context of the occupation of Palestine by Israel. We have read that statement carefully, and it is worth pointing out that the arguments it makes echo those made by both governmental and non-governmental agencies and institutions at the highest level for a number of years.

The student statement begins with language that should satisfy any measure of decency: "The loss of a human life is a deeply painful and heartbreaking experience for loved ones, regardless of one's affiliation. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the individuals and communities at Columbia University affected by the tragic losses experienced by both Palestinians and Israelis." The statement then turns to the claim that peace and safety for all the peoples of Israel and Palestine will remain elusive unless and until the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory ends and accountability for that

illegal occupation is achieved. This is not a radical or essentially controversial position – indeed, it is the position taken by many committees of the United Nations, the UN General Assembly, and respected human rights organizations. The statement also describes the Israeli treatment of Palestinians as a form of “apartheid”, and while this term is viewed as controversial in some quarters, major human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have concluded that the occupation of Palestine and the treatment of Palestinians within Israel amount to a form of apartheid, a crime against humanity with definitions provided in the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (“Apartheid Convention”) and the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Indeed, Desmond Tutu, noted South African civil rights leader who was the first Black archbishop of Cape Town, concluded in 2014 that: “[Palestinians’] humiliation is familiar to all black South Africans who were corralled and harassed and insulted and assaulted by the security forces of the apartheid government.” And President Jimmy Carter has expressed the view that Israel's treatment of Palestinians "perpetrates even worse instances of apartness, or apartheid, than we witnessed even in South Africa."

In our view, the student statement aims to recontextualize the events of October 7, 2023, pointing out that military operations and state violence did not begin that day, but rather it represented a military response by a people who had endured crushing and unrelenting state violence from an occupying power over many years. One could regard the events of October 7th as just one salvo in an ongoing war between an occupying state and the people it occupies, or as an occupied people exercising a right to resist violent and illegal occupation, something anticipated by international humanitarian law in the Second Geneva Protocol. In either case armed resistance by an occupied people must conform to the laws of war, which include a prohibition against the intentional targeting of civilians. The statement reflects and endorses this legal framework, including a condemnation of the killing of civilians.

The statement concludes with a demand that Columbia University reverse a decision to create curricular and research programs in Israel, a demand also made by over 100 Columbia faculty last year, and that the university cease issuing statements that favor the suffering and death of Israelis or Jews over the suffering and death of Palestinians, and/or that fail to recognize how challenging this time has been for all students, not just some.

It is worth noting that not all of us agree with every one of the claims made in the students' statement, but we do agree that making such claims cannot and should not be considered anti-Semitic. Their merits are being debated by governmental and non-governmental agencies at the highest level, and constitute a terrain of completely legitimate political and legal debate.

We are appalled that trucks broadcasting students' names and images are circling the campus, identifying them individually as "Columbia's Leading Anti-Semites", and that some students have had offers of employment withdrawn by employers that sought to punish them for signing the student statement, or for being merely affiliated with student groups associated with the statement. In the absence of university action, students and faculty have undertaken the burden of blocking the images and identifying information broadcast on the doxxing trucks. It is worth noting that most of the students targeted by this doxing campaign are Arab, Muslim, Palestinian, or South Asian.

One of the core responsibilities of a world-class university is to interrogate the underlying facts of both settled propositions and those that are ardently disputed. As faculty we are committed to the project of holding discomfort and working across difference with our students. These core academic values and purposes are profoundly undermined when our students are vilified for voicing perspectives that, while legitimately debated in other institutional settings, expose them to severe forms of harassment and intimidation at Columbia.

We ask Columbia University's leadership, our faculty colleagues, Columbia alumni, potential employers of Columbia students, and all who share a commitment to the notion of a just society to join us in condemning, in the strongest of terms, the vicious targeting of our students with doxing, public shaming, surveillance by members of our community, including other students, and reprisals from employers.

Sincerely,

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